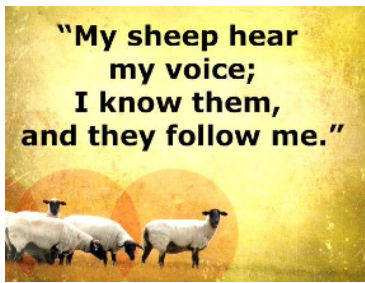


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At the end of a job interview, the interviewer asked a recent graduate what starting salary do you want? The applicant said, "Oh, around \$125,000 depending on benefits." And the interviewer replied, "How about five weeks vacation, full health, company car every two years?" Well, that made the applicant sit up and said, "Wow, are you kidding?" The interviewer smiled and said, "Well, yeah, I am, but you started it." We laughed because we recognized how out of touch our wants can be with the reality around us, and how easily we inflate expectations of what life should give us. However, the fact of the matter is, which would you rather have a high-paying job with great benefits, or the lowest of menial work, dangerous and low-paying, no benefits, huh? I think most of us would want the former, right? And have a nice, cushy job, hands down. The reality is, that is not what Jesus chose. Jesus could have chosen to be anything, have any amount of power, have any amount of prestige in life. However, even though he was called the good shepherd, he never attended sheep. But, still he puts himself out there to us as a good shepherd. A good shepherd because he identifies with the job of a shepherd, taking care, protecting, laying down his life for the most vulnerable.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter, commonly called Good Shepherd Sunday. The image of good shepherd happens to be one of the earliest images of Jesus going back to the third century. They find etchings and drawings on walls and catacombs of Jesus as good shepherd. It's clear the early Christians related to Jesus as a shepherd and recognize as they were like sheep, although that story being sheeped, that's a time for another message, right? But let's focus on what about Jesus. In Jesus' day, what was a shepherd? It was the low status, smelly, lonely job. Shepherds were often among the youngest in the household, set out in the fields to protect and tend the animals. They were ritually unclean and socially marginalized. Jewish law often treated their testimony as unreliable. Yet the Bible repeatedly tells us of shepherds to describe God's care. Psalm 23, which we have heard today, Ezekiel 34, promise of the shepherd who will seek the lost. And we remember Jesus is own parable in Luke and Matthew of the shepherd who leaves the 99 behind, right, to find

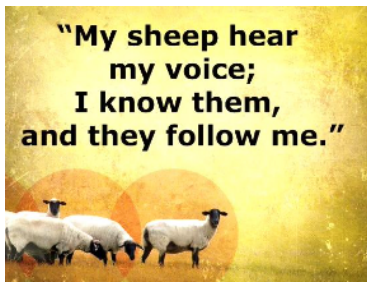


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the one lost sheep. So, when Jesus calls himself the good shepherd, the word good doesn't point to a bland niceness but to a model shepherd, the one who does the hard work of reckoning, rescuing, tending and if need be laying down his life for the sheep, protecting the sheep by being the gate so nothing harmful can come to the sheep. Jesus doesn't call himself the good rabbi or the great teacher or the good carpenter. He calls himself the good shepherd and deliberately identifies with this marginalized but vital role. He goes to the edges, the places of danger, loneliness and shame to find and carry home all who are lost.

During the COVID pandemic, there were many good shepherds at work, and I'm sure many of them were here, too, where neighborhoods organize teams to deliver groceries and medicine to the elderly and people in quarantine. One team member remembers a night delivery to where they found an elderly woman who hadn't opened her door in days. She was frightened, isolated and confused about her medications. The volunteers didn't simply drop the order at her door and leave. They sat with her, called her family, arranged medical check-ins and connected her with a telehealth worker. Over the next month, they checked on her repeatedly to make sure she was safely stabilized in having regular care. So that team, as you can probably agree with me, did what good shepherds do. They left their comfort zone, risked inconvenience and exposure, showed up where a few dared to go, and they listened and cared and stayed until the person was safe. They prioritized the one who was vulnerable rather than their comfort, staying with the 99.

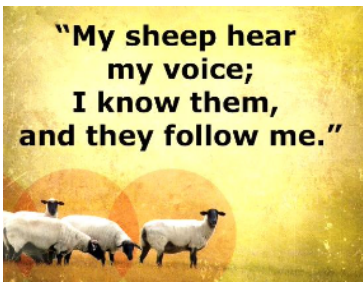
Our society faces huge and visible walls, doesn't it not? Economic inequality, persistent homelessness, fractured families, refugee problems, mental health crises, loneliness epidemic that has been made worse by social media. It's easy to admire the comfy Psalm 23 picture, the green pastures and still waters while ignoring the people lying injured on the road. Jesus' shepherding challenges both the complacency and systems that let people fall



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through the cracks. The good shepherd risks a reputation, comfort, and sometimes safety to pursue the lost. Jesus didn't choose that image of being a good shepherd because it was pretty. He chose it because shepherding is sacrificial, counter-cultural, and relentless. The good shepherd goes to those margins, leaving the 99 behind if he must. But, if we follow him, we will be marked not by comfortable, religious language, but by messy, costly love.

Our scriptures ask us how are we being good shepherds in our communities today? Who are the lost, the frightened, the lonely, and the vulnerable that we are called to serve? On my recent border trip, I met a modern-day shepherd named Rosie. Rosie is a social worker who works as a migrant services coordinator for Abara, the agency I went down to the border with. Ten years ago, Rosie found herself where she was deported from the United States, and then in 2016, she received a call to serve at the border. She says that she heard that call in her heart, and it was impossible to reject it. She started serving in the shelters in Juarez, which is next to the city right on the border. She started as a volunteer, worked in an event called Hugs, Not Walls, delivering supplies and donations, collections of clothes and toys among other activities. And during the pandemic, she was invited by the UN to coordinate what was called the COVID-19 filter hotel for migrants, and nearly 3,000 migrants passed through that shelter, and Rosie and her team provided the care, the care, working with various organizations that were local and national, fine national, international, to take care of these very vulnerable migrants. Some of you might recall my message from last week when I talked about a 22-year-old migrant I met, whose name was Sestos. I shared how he came to the U.S. as a three-day old infant. And he wanted to make something with this life, and he saw that he could never do that as an undocumented migrant in the U.S. So, he left behind, the only country he knew, the United States, and went to Mexico several months ago. Do you know who helped him? It was Rosie. Rosie is the reason that Sestos was able to find -- she took him in, so he found shelter. He found his ID, work, and finally an ability to apply to college in Juarez. That's what a good shepherd does. Like Jesus was a shepherd who



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became the lamb who was slaughtered, we too become our sheep who are called to be shepherds in the image of Jesus. Like Rosie to leave traces of love in the lives of those around us, to care for the vulnerable and lost of the world. Because we've been given a message of love and care to pass on. So, let us follow the risen Lord, our good shepherd who leads us on paths of righteousness, to speak the truth, to act in love, to lay down our lives when necessary, so that one lost soul that God has placed on our path will, through our reaching out and our helping, find themselves safely home. Amen.